

Highlights, Democracy Summit, Center for Journalism & Democracy, Howard University, Nov. 15, 2022

The youtube recording, with transcript, is here --

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXhWqDyRkQI&t=4410s>

These comments aren't presented in chronological order. They're divided into the five topic sections below. Speakers' names are appended to their comments. But this piece is based on my notes and interpretations, it may not be a fully accurate account of their statements.

The sections are --

***Section One:** Signs of a weakening democracy*

***Section Two:** Causes of rising authoritarian attitudes*

***Section Three:** How human nature and selective memory weaken democracy*

***Section Four:** The press and democracy today*

***Section Five:** Suggestions for pro-democracy media improvements*

Section One: Signs of a weakening democracy

If candidates who lose elections don't accept defeat, the democracy is dying. (Steven Levitsky, professor, Harvard, Latin American studies and government, 2018 co-author with Daniel Ziblatt of *How Democracies Die*)

In a true democracy, political parties only support those who play by democratic rules. So Republicans openly or tacitly supporting an impeached president who ran a coup when he announces for the presidency again is a "terrible precedent" for the U.S.

Political parties don't even do this in Latin America, where democracies have yet to become stable. Argentina, which is has had six coups, now rates higher than the U.S. in strength-of-democracy because their parties don't support candidates who've supported coups. (Levitsky)

When political affiliation is strongly tied to people's sense of personal identity, it makes every electoral contest seem to be an existential threat to every party member. Globally, this level of hyper-

partisanship has been shown to increase the risk of political violence and to weaken democracy. Today's media structure along with social media amps up this partisanship and increase the dangers. (Avery Davis-Roberts, associate director, Democracy Program, The Carter Center)

“Strong-man” political leaders who inspire cultish devotion are an established feature of authoritarianism and a bad sign for democracy. The strong-man presents two sides. They're at once an infallible, omnipotent savior of the nation...and a victim -- a person who takes the hits for their people and is the object of “witch hunts.” This double image of victim and brute is enticing to the cult. And a cult that believes their leader is under threat can be drawn into doing violence on his behalf.

Trump's current status puts the U.S. “in a truly unusual situation.” Around the world, all leaders who've tried a self-coup and failed either went to prison, were disgraced, or had to go into the exile. Only in the U.S. do we “have him running around” – a particularly dangerous situation because to the strong-man personality losing or being pushed out is “like a psychological death.” And with Trump still on the scene and active, he can stir up intense feelings and violence among his followers. (Ruth Ben-Ghiat, professor, New York University, history and Italian studies, 2020 author of *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present*)

POLITICAL VIOLENCE:

In a true democracy, no political party can be linked in any way to political violence or appear to support or tolerate it. In 2020, there were more than a hundred Republican political ads in which people brandished guns or fired guns) “I can't think of any political party in the world that's done that.” (Levitsky)

As long as a political party's rhetoric flirts with violence, there'll be high risk of political violence, like the Paul Pelosi attack. The risk only goes down when that party's leaders unambiguously and totally denounce each violent act. Unless the Republican party stops praising and inviting as guests at their events people like the McCloskeys and Kyle Rittenhouse, the threat of violence will not wane. (Levitsky)

Section Two: Causes of rising authoritarian attitudes

Historical patterns and psychological research show that fear of being displaced from a formerly dominant position often leads people to embrace autocracy, racial intolerance and other right-wing ideas. For example, in 2014 studies Yale social psychologist Jennifer Richeson exposed different groups of white U.S. study subjects to variously bleak projections of white-majority dominance in the future.

The subjects who read the dimmest projections – that by 2042 current U.S. minority populations taken as a group would outnumber whites – gave the most right-wing, autocracy-friendly responses to a range of political and social questions, not just on affirmative action and immigration but on issues like defense spending and human-caused climate change. (Jason Stanley, professor, Yale, philosophy, 2018 author of *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*)

Globally, after significant progress on matters like racial equality, gender equality and workers' rights, strong-man leaders often rise to popularity. Populations who've previously felt secure in their social dominance suddenly feel their position is threatened and seek an autocrat's help to fight back. (Ben-Ghiat)

A decline in the numbers and social dominance of conservative white Christians fuels current U.S. anti-democracy sentiment. For years, white U.S. Christians viewed being the country's dominant group as integral to their personal identities. They were mayors, governors, Fortune 500 CEOs and much more. Republicans in the 1970s began putting all their energies into cementing an alliance with white Christians and captured that big powerful vote.

In 1994, three of four voters identified as white Christians. But then the numbers started to drop, first among liberal denominations but spreading in the 2000s to conservative churches as well. By 2016 only 43 percent of voters identified as white Christians. Many commentators initially speculated that these dwindling numbers might begin to limit conservative white Christians' political clout in the Republican party.

But because white Christians see their weakening grip on national dominance as catastrophic to their identities – an existential crisis, almost a death – they grew determined to fight back ferociously. It's this phenomenon that drives their anti-democracy sentiments, authoritarianism, and ardent political participation. (Levitsky)

An early instance of today's anti-democracy movement was the Tea Party, one of whose mottoes was "Take Our Country Back." The slogan raised the question "Take it back from whom?" And many commentators guessed it was a protest against liberal policies like higher taxes and government-sponsored health care. But, in fact, it had nothing to do with policies.

It signaled an existential crisis among the dominant population -- their fear of a "Great Replacement." The Tea Party began one month after the Obamas moved into the White House and expressed the white Christian majority's horror at the growth of multiracial democracy. (Levitsky)

The panic and aggression many white Christians direct today toward Trans communities is another example of a "Great Replacement" myth and the existential crisis and fight-or-die mode such fears can trigger in a long-dominant group. While race often drives the existential crisis, in this case it's the equally irrational fear of Trans women replacing cisgender women. (Stanley)

Today's simmering violence and anti-democracy actions by white Americans aren't the first. After the Civil War, Democrats in the south believed they faced the same existential crisis and turned to violence, terrorism and legislation to dismantle the country's first attempt at multiracial democracy. And they succeeded.

Between 1880 and 1912, the percentage of Black men in the south who voted dropped from 61% to 2%. The current problems are essentially the same response by the same dominant group against America's second attempt at establishing a true, multiracial democracy. (Levitsky)

Autocrats looking to grab or increase power can incite violence using "Great Replacement" myths and other "survivalist" language. History shows that if you want to get people to break taboos and be

violent, you need to bring them to a “froth of hatred and anxiety” that suggests they’re in mortal danger they can blame on an enemy.

“It’s you or me...and only one of us will survive.” “We’re being bombarded with these survivalist ideologies,” in statement like this -- “If you don’t fight like hell you’re not going to have a country anymore.” (Ben-Ghiat)

Moving a country back to a more pro-democracy stance would require deep change in opinions and emotions. Individual democracy opponents would have to lose their fear and stop feeling that they face the existential threat of losing their long-held positions in society.

For a party to back away from anti-democracy activities, its members would need to believe they can win future elections and believe that if they lose an election, it doesn’t mean an end to their cherished status. Unless they start feeling that those things are true, they’ll go for “win at any cost” – and that leads away from democracy (Levitsky)

Section Three: How human nature and selective memory weaken democracy

In her studies of how strong-man authoritarians have risen to power, historian Ben-Ghiat found that every culture went through denial of what was happening. “Nobody wanted to recognize what was in front of them.”

One likely reason for this widespread denial – and the reluctance to call a spade a spade -- is simply human nature. Most of us instinctively avoid difficult, dangerous or ill-understood confrontations. And if you begin to acknowledge that an authoritarian threat is rising, you might have to do something about it. (Ben-Ghiat)

Another staple of human behavior is “anticipatory obedience.” And it’s fundamental to the development of authoritarianism. You self-censor before you’re told to, thus doing the work of authoritarians for them. You tell yourself you have a good reason for this –Speaking freely might ruin your career!

In Ben-Ghiat’s studies of Berlusconi, among others, she saw that institutions and individuals practice anticipatory obedience whenever they feel anxiety about the person at the top. But anticipatory obedience has an inevitable unintended consequence – It actually hurries along development of authoritarian norms, including norms of violence and corruption. The recent firings at CNN, for example, are typical anticipatory obedience done out of corporate self-protection. (Ben-Ghiat)

Anticipatory obedience comes to us so naturally that even writers who fully intend to tell hard truths and practice resistance sometimes find themselves obeying in advance instead. Jody Rave Spotted Bear, who writes mainly about and for the indigenous community, has made it her life’s work to encourage writing about tough issues without neutralizing one’s vocabulary.

But when writing a recent op-ed, she realized she was self-censoring, wondering “What’s a more neutral word for white supremacy?” (Jodi Rave Spotted Bear, founder and executive director, Indigenous Media Freedom Alliance)

Even historians writing about long-gone events sometimes soften their language just in case anybody with authority objects. For example, described accurately, the 20th-century movement of millions of Black Americans’ north and westward from the southern states would be dubbed “people fleeing apartheid.” But historians have named it “The Great Migration” instead, using a soft touch “to paper over the oppression.” It’s unlikely they were fully conscious of their motivations for the neutral phrasing, but it was “a sort of instinctive soft pedaling.” (Kathy Roberts Forde, professor, University of Massachusetts Amherst, journalism history, 2021 editor, *Journalism and Jim Crow: White Supremacy and the Black Struggle for a New America*)

FALSE ASSUMPTIONS AND OUTDATED CONCEPTS

Our historical image of how democracies die is completely different from the way they die today. Democracies used to die with coups and guns. Now they die at the hands of elected officials, behind a façade of a functioning government, often even one that holds elections. This is how Putin, Orban, and others have ended democracies. So it’s hard to get your mind around the idea that the countries they rule aren’t democracies of a kind. But they aren’t. (Levitsky)

Many Christian churches and leaders are among today’s strongest U.S. opponents of democracy. But there’s an unspoken agreement in the U.S. that the press and others should speak of Christianity – and to a lesser extent religion in general – as unquestionably good.

Today’s Republican party is strongly allied with conservative white Christians in a campaign to gain the authoritarian power needed to impose their religious principles on the nation as a whole. That makes a major branch of Christianity a foundational element in the anti-democracy movement. But reluctance to state that flatly is widespread across U.S. society. (Anthea Butler, professor, University of Pennsylvania, religious studies, 2021 author of *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*)

White people in the U.S. generally envision the country having a common memory, a shared historical story, providing a tacit, agreed-upon context for current events. But the Black and indigenous communities, among others, understand that there is no such shared memory. These communities generally view U.S. history as part of a global settler-colonial project, a vision that relatively white people share. That difference causes communication problems and trouble “getting together as a nation.” (Greg Carr, professor, Howard University, African-American studies)

Historical omissions and selective memory mean being able to tell yourself that deliberate wrongs committed in the past were really just oversights or unfortunate accidents. When we don’t remember, we don’t fully understand the world we’re in today -- who’s on the top, who’s on the bottom. And it makes our proposed solutions weak and beside the point.

Acknowledging the fact that the U.S. system built to defend slavery and the settler-colonial land grab is essential to understanding the state of the nation today. (Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, professor, Northwestern University, African-American Studies, contributing writer at the *New Yorker*)

The pleasant myth of the U.S. as the oldest and greatest of democracies obscures historical fact and leads to us to misunderstand how current events relate to the past. Yale's Stanley cited a 1995 address in which novelist Toni Morrison noted that the U.S. has often opted for fascist solutions to problems, especially racial ones.

Those include the southern states instituting mass incarceration and quashing the labor movement after the Civil War, the Jim Crow laws on which Hitler's Germany modeled its Nuremberg Race Laws, and the 20th-century resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. "It's not clear to me that we've ever had a democratic culture in some of the states." (Stanley)

U.S. PRESS HISTORY

Some criticism of how today's media covers issues the U.S. voting system and state of democracy carry a whiff a nostalgia, almost suggesting that such coverage has deteriorated recently and could improve by resetting its practices to those of an earlier Golden Age. But on this set of issues, at least, that suggestion is wrong. A press that supports the franchise for everyone has never existed in the U.S. mainstream press. (Wesley Lowery, freelance journalist, Pulitzer Prize-winner)

White newspaper editors were important political and economic actors in the southern states' ongoing assault on true democracy from 1865 to 1965. This is a disturbing reality for journalists. But it's vital for news institutions to come to terms with these facts and to understand in what ways this legacy lives on through the phenomenon of "path dependence" -- the processes by which past events constrain later actions and opinions.

Meanwhile, from its beginning in 1827, the U.S. Black press documented this long war on democracy and many of its editors were activists and thus front-row participants in the struggle. (Kathy Roberts Forde, professor, University of Massachusetts Amherst, journalism history, 2021 editor, *Journalism and Jim Crow: White Supremacy and the Black Struggle for a New America*)

After the Civil War, press leaders wielded both soft and hard power to stop development of a multicultural democracy. The soft power that shaped people's opinions came in the form of newspaper stories about black criminality, for example.

And editors across the southern states helped lead campaigns to disenfranchise and disempower all Black citizens. In 1875, for example, Ethelbert Barksdale, editor of Mississippi's leading Democratic newspaper, devised the first phase of what's known as "The Mississippi Plan." This campaign of electoral fraud, propaganda and violence -- including multiple murders committed by paramilitary groups -- ultimately shut down all Black participation in the state's government and economy. (Roberts Forde)

Section Four: The press and democracy today

The foundation of today's U.S. political reporting method is a semiconscious and half-buried picture Of two parties that are essentially similar, with the media standing in the middle and keeping score. That's why we treat politics as a game. But this image of politics is no longer accurate. Today we have a

two-party system in which one is anti-democratic. So the biggest problem is this – What kind of consensus can replace the now-false image? (Rosen)

For decades, the accepted approach to avoiding partisan bias in news coverage was to treat the two parties as equivalent. Today, the parties have diverged so widely in aims and behavior that this seems impossible.

In response, some now propose that non-partisan reporting can be had if journalists measure both parties' statements and actions against a single yardstick representing a core U.S. political value: How "pro-democracy" is the thing being said or done?

But as journalism professor Jay Rosen makes the rounds of newsrooms suggesting this option, he finds many in the industry already foreclosing on it as irrelevant to avoiding bias. "Oh, you mean pro-Biden," they respond. They assume their worst fear is what's really being described – That in the name of using a single yardstick to measure political action, a journalist will simply pick sides and support their favorite party. (Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University, writer of NYU's blog of media analysis, PressThink)

As Journalism became professionalized through the 20th- and into the 21st-century, it took the democratic order more and more for granted. And when you take something for granted, you treat it more thoughtlessly. In fact, though, full multicultural democracy wasn't even tried in the U.S. until the 1965 Civil Rights Act.

So despite what most Americans and U.S. journalists believe, we haven't always been a democracy. We're in the early decades of trying to be a true one, and beginnings are fragile. Journalists need to help in that learning and changing process, although most don't seem aware of that. (Rosen)

THE NEWS BUSINESS

Our current form of journalism is a capitalist concept. So it serves the present power structure. One thing that follows from that is the relative thoughtlessness that goes into a lot of journalism. We're just magnifying glasses for a lot of things said by people who hold some form of power. (Lowery)

Nearly every practice and routine of journalism today is, at bottom, about making money. Take the deadlines for example, which often lead to work that's rote and oversimplified. That's a capitalist construct. Without it, you could actually just write until you figured out the truth. (Lowery)

In the past 100 years of establishment U.S. journalism, so-called objectivity has been the standard, at least theoretically. The news business is interested in projecting neutrality because Republicans buy sneakers, too. (Lowery)

The business interest of the outlet wants eyeballs because that means money. But this often conflicts with doing the journalism that might have the most value for the public. Take election night, for example. We sit for hours and look at a map. And we learn nothing. Although there are lots of ways you could fill that time sensibly, the interest of the business is in "how do we make people stare at our screen for a long time?"

Another example is so-called “access journalism.” Here’s what it means in practice -- My values might say, “Report this in a certain way.” But it’s often in the interest of the paper, and even the interest of the individual journalist, to have Republicans return your phone call. (Lowery)

The access problem worsens as the digital age advances. With so many media channels, a nearly endless number of options allow people to get their messages out, especially people with power, influence, celebrity or money. And the attention can come without the skepticism or pushback they might face from a traditional journalist. When other megaphones are available, why return the call of someone who’ll ask a question you’d prefer not to answer?

JOURNALISM IS HARD WORK THAT’S GETTING HARDER

Reporting on politics is harder than you think. Astead Herndon covered his first Trump rally, in New Hampshire, for the *Boston Globe*. He joined the *New York Times* as a national political reporter in 2018. Even with some years of reporting under his belt, he underestimated the difficulty. Before starting the job, he was confident, thinking “I’m about to show these people how this is done,” he says.

“But you go there, and it’s so much harder than you thought. You look at a page on deadline and you don’t know where to start.” But “you do get better” with experience, he told the many young and aspiring journalists in the audience. (Astead Herndon, national political reporter, *New York Times*)

Writing in a democracy about anti-democracy politicians presents difficulties journalists don’t know how to work around, according to Jonathan Karl, ABC News chief Washington correspondent and 2021 author of *Betrayal: The Final Act of the Trump Show*.

Journalism professor Jay Rosen quoted Karl as saying that if Trump “runs again, it’s going to be an enormous challenge because he’s an anti-democratic candidate running in a system he’s trying to tear down...constantly lying and trying to use us as a conduit for those lies. How do you even do an interview?” Pressed on how he’ll handle this, Karl said, “I don’t know.” (Rosen)

The longtime standard of journalistic objectivity is creating fear among reporters as Republican behaviors diverge from old norms. And if a writer doesn’t use neutral language to describe these out-of-the-ordinary actions, critics – especially those on the right – call them alarmist and destructive (Ben-Ghiat)

Many journalists of color today are among those who “see the canaries in the mine falling.” But when we scream, we’re being told, “Can you just calm down?” **we’re screaming and being told – Can you just calm down?** (Maria Hinojosa, founder, president and CEO, Futuro Media Group, four-time Emmy winner, 2022 Pulitzer Prize winner with Futuro media)

Writers need to earn a living from their work, but those who speak up about authoritarian threats can find their livelihoods and even their lives threatened. When writer and Northwestern University professor Taylor gave a 2017 commencement address, Fox News grabbed a portion of the speech describing former President Trump as “a racist, sexist maniac” and played it on a loop for days. Her mailbox was deluged with death threats and she had to cancel an upcoming book tour. (Taylor)

Section Five: Suggestions for pro-democracy media improvements

The U.S. is a democracy that has often failed to tell the truth about itself. So what the country needs now is historically informed reporting for the common good. (Nikole Hannah-Jones, inaugural Knight Chair in Race and Journalism, Howard University School of Communications, founder of Howard's Center for Journalism and Democracy, 2020 Pulitzer Prize winner for commentary, *1619 Project*)

Too many of us as reporters wake up with amnesia every morning. As journalists our job is to report on history. Public history is increasingly the job that journalism needs to do (lowery)

The reigning standard for fairness and accuracy in U.S. journalism is the effort to be an “objective” observer and reporter of “both sides” without indulging in partisan bias toward either of those (two?) sides. Now there's an attempt to institute a new standard by focusing political journalism on a single important value and reporting how well each political entity supports or undermines that value.

“Democracy” is the value usually proposed. That's because there's thought to have been a long-term consensus in the U.S. that democracy is perhaps the country's greatest strength and founding ideal and the most central to the nation's functioning. Supporters of a new value-based standard argue that it promotes fair and accurate journalism because it requires journalists to report on pro-democratic or anti-democratic assertions or actions by all political parties and actors. all political parties and actors. (Rosen)

Models of implementing a value-based reporting standards exist abroad. Traveling to Kenya after 2007 elections there, journalist Maria Hinojosa watched the development of a standard there – peace journalism.

After experiencing a bloody partisan massacre of more than 1500 people – In a country that shares a border with Rwanda – Kenyan journalists talked of seeing blood in their own streets. And many believed they bore responsibility for bloodshed because they'd often written about tribal divisions in the nation. Some proposed setting a new value-centered standard for good journalism: Always keep this question top of mind – How will this be helpful in getting to peace? (Hinojosa)

The standard of being “objective” about “both sides” has created a taboo on journalists' revealing any of their own values. When a journalist's values are found out, some view all their reporting to be then compromised by inevitable bias, even if they support a consensus U.S. value like democracy. That's never made sense. All people including journalists have values and principles. And holding a value openly doesn't guarantee a bias in its favor, while And keeping values secret doesn't guarantee objectivity. Even journalism organizations that pretend to be neutral have values and act on them, such as by prioritizing one kind of story over another.

Shifting to values-based journalism requires us to acknowledge that we're all actors in politics and society, and so it's important for us to know what our own values are and to be direct and clear about them to others. No one can avoid acting on their own values, and many values are political. To be pro-First-Amendment, for example, is political stance.

But that openness doesn't mean we'd be abandoning our first and most important job – writing an accurate representation of what's happening and being said....writing down true things. Journalists now are too caught up in the idea that white Republicans don't trust the press. Our legitimacy doesn't come from people liking us. It comes from saying things that are true. It's okay for us to be unpopular, okay for us to be attacked. In some ways it's our job. (Lowery)

The current and longstanding U.S. view of political journalism is that it's written by a distant observer chronicling a game between two sides....That view has served a white elite press that has written it, said Herndon of the *New York Times*. But today -- in our first few decades of struggling to form a multicultural democracy -- it's vital to bring more content and viewpoints into the work. The current paradigm eliminates too many topics that need to be covered – including the history of U.S. democracy, as well as the public policies being discussed and created and their potential effects throughout society.

For example, the Black press has always seen the clash between racism and democracy. We're engaged in putting that legacy in front of people who'd rather not see it. I do that in an institution that's shed light on these things and also perpetuated these things. It's my role as a Black person to write about that and put it in language people can understand. (Herndon)

THINGS TO DO

Call attention to repeating patterns in history. And stop writing about things as if they're new and unique when they're following a historical pattern.

For example, in the U.S., since the 19th century, whenever Black protests have called out an injustice – like recent multiple police killings of unarmed Black men – a harsh white backlash has followed, like the skyrocketing incarceration rate that followed the civil-rights era of the 1950s and '60s. This pattern repeats and repeats and repeats. Yet most reporting of these events describe them as if they were one-offs, which effectively keeps them from being understood. (Stanley)

When a politician calls something a problem, fact check and analyze. Never just mimic the accusation, which is usually what's done today. Is this a real crisis or is it a moral panic? What do the stats say about the size of the issue? Is it a recurring problem in history or something new? What light can history shed on the problem? Is it a problem that the accusing politician's opponent can effectively address or not? What exactly is the politician proposing to address the problem? Etc. Etc. Journalism is supposed to be about fact checking and providing context, not parroting. (Stanley)

Take back language that's been co-opted by anti-democracy forces, such as “patriotism,” now often used to describe people who attempted an armed takeover of the sitting Congress at the Capitol. Analysis of the language we're handed or are about to use helps.

For example, Florida Gov. DeSantis criticizes what he calls “The Woke Mob.” But what is that? What's the opposite of being “woke?” It's being asleep, or being a zombie. But that's what people do under authoritarianism, where their wills are replaced by a leader's will or where they may hide to protect themselves. Is that we want Americans to do? As a journalist your job is not to push back on what's said. It is to analyze it and say, What does this mean? (Ben-Ghiat)

Political campaigns aren't horse races. But they're often covered more sloppily than horse races. Start your campaign coverage by asking voters what they'd like the politicians to talk about. Then teach

readers how to be informed participants in the election – where, after all, they’ll determine the outcome. What are the stakes for residents of a win or a loss for each candidate? What are the odds of each candidate’s winning – and why? Etc. (Rosen)

When you cite a politician who’s saying something false, warn your readers every time. And give them the facts, stats or rigorous arguments that demonstrate the statement is untrue. (Hinojosa)

Cover issues because they’re important in people’s lives and the life of a nation, not because “Uh-oh, now there’s a crisis!” On issue after issue, establishment journalism is covering topics only after catastrophe is imminent or has already happened. Even though problems have bubbled along just under the surface for ages. To give just one example, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch examined race issues in the local police forces only after Michael Brown was killed, although evidence of problems had been seen for years. (Lowery)

When you’re bringing new issues to your editor, learn to make a different kind of argument. If you bring a different perspective to your newsroom, you need to understand that your bosses almost certainly won’t start out caring about the issues or people you care about. If you make that assumption, it’s a near-guarantee that your pitch won’t be accepted. You have (Herndon)

Publications shy away from doing many stories that dig deep and often tell themselves it’s because people won’t watch or read them. But Maria Hinojosa’s small newsroom doesn’t prize speed, so they’ve had a chance to learn that “the more profound work ends up getting more views.”

If there’s a word – like “racist” – that you can’t get past the editors, by digging deep and interviewing intensively, you can report details in which the person you’re describing reveals their racism on their own. In that way, “you’re reporting facts, not accusing somebody of something.” If you do your job, you can demonstrate racism, for example, and also prove it’s important and prove it’s wrong, without issuing a specific judgment, said Herndon of the *Times*.

“As an election reporter, I think I have a responsibility to cover everybody,” including going to Trump rallies and talking to people. I learned to talk to Trump voters by talking to Black voters about how media had hurt them....learned how to convince them that I’d be accurate and fair ... If you’re going to be a reporter, you have to do that because people won’t talk to you otherwise. (Herndon)

Media criticism must get much better. We do a very poor job of holding our colleagues responsible – We don’t want to criticize other journalists or journalism outlets. We’ve pretended that people and organizations good-faith actors when they’re never been. Media reporting is way too frivolous and gossipy. (Lowery)

Pay attention to the world. Learn about and report on the many countries – Brazil, India, Hungary, for example – that are dealing with the same political issues as the U.S. That context can help provide perspective and insights.

U.S. journalism should also stop hiding from the history of American authoritarian and fascist movements. Ignoring that history makes it even harder to believe what’s happening here now. And ignoring the authoritarian history also means that the history of protest, resistance and change are also ignored. (Stanley)

Cover solutions, not just problems. When politicians complain about something, it's vital to also cover what's known and theorized about the causes of the problem....and to cover proposed solutions and solutions that have been found effective elsewhere or in the past. This changes the conversation from a dead-end, meaningless argument to what the democratic process is actually about – seeking ways to move forward to a better future. (Stanley)

Talk to the people in the trenches who know the details of how elections work. Survey data show that if people want accurate information about elections, state and local election administrators are among the most trusted sources, for voters of all demographics and parties. Instead of writing another “both-sider” story featuring party leaders or politicians fighting over elector issues, interview these people instead. (Rachel Orey , associate director, Elections Project, Bipartisan Policy Center)

Report and write much more about the detailed workings of democracy, which is still largely ignored by the press. Without coverage of topics such as the recent racial gerrymandering in Florida, voters don't even know what's happening to their democracy. Only if such coverage happens will people be inspired to care and fight back. Redistricting happens at every level, and there's a rich wealth of material – including historical material -- that could be mined to help Americans understand the degree to which their power and fair representation are under threat and what they can do about it. (Sherilynn Ifill, former president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.)

THINGS TO STOP DOING

Stop parroting false equivalencies or creating your own, something even leading newspapers do often. Journalists sometimes adopt a politician or pundit's false comparison, such as likening a student walkout from a speech on white supremacy as “left-wing authoritarianism.” Reporting the truth means analyzing the details of the situation and the language used to figure out just how similar – and dissimilar – the two things are.

Often the old “be objective” about “both sides” practice leads journalists to create their own “on the one hand/on the other” false pairings. For example, speaking of the Black Lives Matter protests and the Jan. 6 Capitol attack as the same. Looked at closely, the comparison is absurd – one was largely nonviolent and unarmed and sought a remedy for some injustices, while the other included violence and many armed participants and sought to key functions of the U.S. democracy. (Stanley)

Don't mimic the language of someone who's lying or using words in a misleading way. This requires care because it's easy to mimic any language you hear often. The phrase “election integrity” as currently used by the right means the opposite of its standard meaning, for example. Repeating it without unpacking its traditional meaning and what it's being used to mean now normalizes the misleading use. (Ben-Ghiat)

Don't write about propaganda without analyzing it in terms of its truth, its persuasive techniques and its intention because repetition will turbocharge it. Having just one major story repeat your propaganda without skeptical analysis makes it much easier for the propagandist. (Stanley)

Don't assume any press release or other statement is accurate and straightforward rather than PR. Don't let yourself become a stenographer by trusting without verifying. When ProPublica reporter Cassandra Jaramillo worked in Texas, her outlet wrote up what a state press release claimed was a legitimate effort to clean up voter rolls.

But when the *Texas Tribune* dug into the program, they discovered it was a coverup for an effort to get immigrants off the rolls. So they reported the truth. Jaramilla's old organization took the right next step—conducting a post-mortem of their gullible reporting so they'd avoid making the same mistake again. (Cassandra Jaramillo, national investigative reporter focusing on threats to democracy, ProPublica)

Don't ignore the attention economy. All readers have limited time and attention. It's journalism's job to write about the things that will really matter to readers. Just because something's happening, it's loud, it involves well-known people, it's easy to write up and it's available to you doesn't mean there's any reason to write it. Focus on what's really important. (Stanley)

Don't waste your time looking for a neutral vocabulary. It doesn't exist. What are the neutral terms for "generous," "selfish," "kind," "lying," "fascism," etc.? There aren't any. (Stanley)

Don't search for "intent." Is Trump doing x, y or z intentionally? Is he doing it cynically? Is he acting out of ignorance? We see questions like this in the media all the time. But they're a waste of energy. The intent doesn't matter because fascism and authoritarianism are tools some people use to win power. They're particular strategies some people employ to win elections and take control and get other things they want. What's "in the heart" of such a person is irrelevant to their actions' effects on the country and its people. (Stanley, Ben-Ghiat)

PRO-DEMOCRACY ORGANIZATIONAL OPTIONS

Throughout history, local journalism has proven it can help dilute the power and danger of propaganda. (Stanley)

Media should unionize. History demonstrates a strong connection between empowered labor and democracy. (Stanley)

Newsrooms are beginning to recruit more people of color. Excellent journalism has to speak to the society it's in, and that requires newsrooms to be representative of that society.

But as staffs grow more diverse, many new journalists have different ideas from previous generations, and tension and confusion often come along with that. Editors must open up conversations about what "news" really means today and what newsroom staffs being more representative of society as a whole means for journalistic procedures and values. (Rosen, Hinojosa)

Bringing context, history and analysis into reporting and focusing on pro-democracy values instead of "bothsiderism" requires longer-form pieces and longer deadlines. Today's quickie deadlines won't accommodate that kind of writing. Speed plays a big role in current journalistic blind spots. (Davis-Roberts, Roberts Forde)

More small independent media. media serving specific communities, nonprofit media and public media are all needed to build pro-democracy journalism. For example, the country's multiple Black newspapers and media serving indigenous communities provide platforms for new voices as well as deep dives into community stories that would otherwise be missed entirely even though many have wide relevance.

And to get past clickbait and sensationalism to journalism on serious issues, it's vital that for-profit media not be the only game in town. Besides nonprofit media, much-expanded publicly funded media would have value as well. (Carr, Roberts Forde, Spotted Bear)

Marcia Clemmitt, Dec. 4, 2022

